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ABSTRACT

Structures that produce negative effects for some children are discussed, including grouping practices. A role for the states in moving away from traditional approaches is outlined. Current ability grouping and tracking are critical barriers to creating high expectations for all students, and they perpetuate low levels of performance for average and below-average students and tend to maintain the low expectations often held for minority groups. Existing grouping practices tend to sort children out of learning opportunities. Systemic change is needed to link social service programs to the education system, to improve student readiness to enter school, and to define and implement accountability systems that the public understands and embraces. Change cannot occur over night, and the support of Governors and other policymakers is vital to the success of reform efforts. Some state efforts toward reform in the area of ability grouping and tracking are reviewed. Supportive state strategies are particularly possible in the areas of: (1) incentives to schools to consider more flexible grouping; (2) networks of practitioners to share successful approaches; (3) assistance to schools; (4) professional development; (5) communication; and (6) focus on the context of reform. Appendix A contains three essays on current practices, and Appendix B analyzes issues and recommendations from a recent working meeting on ability grouping and tracking. (Contains 22 references.) (SLD)

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Ability Grouping And Tracking

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National Governors' Association

Ability Grouping And Tracking

Current Issues and Concerns

by Patricia Brown
and Paul Goren

Education Policy Studies
Center for Policy Research

National Governors' Association

Since their initial meeting in 1908 to discuss interstate water problems, the Governors have worked through the National Governors' Association to deal collectively with issues of public policy and governance. The association's ongoing mission is to support the work of the Governors by providing a bipartisan forum to help shape and implement national policy and to solve state problems.

The members of the National Governors' Association are the Governors of the fifty states, the territories of American Samoa, Guam, and the Virgin Islands, and the commonwealths of the Northern Mariana Islands and Puerto Rico. The association has a nine-member Executive Committee, a Task Force on State Management, and three standing committees—on Economic Development and Commerce, Human Resources, and Natural Resources. Through NGA's committees, the Governors examine and develop policy and address key state and national issues. Special task forces often are created to focus gubernatorial attention on federal legislation or on state-level issues.

The association works closely with the administration and Congress on state-federal policy issues through its offices in the Hall of the States in Washington, D.C. The association serves as a vehicle for sharing knowledge of innovative programs among the states and provides technical assistance and consultant services to Governors on a wide range of management and policy issues.

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Introduction

Increasingly, educators and policymakers are concluding that a basic overhaul of the education system is needed for schools to become places where all children can learn. Yet the current education system poses a serious challenge to meeting the six National Education Goals established in 1990 and the higher standards recommended to Congress by the National Council on Education Standards and Testing. A 1990 National Governors' Association report, *Educating America: State Strategies for Achieving the National Education Goals*, addressed the barriers to achieving the goals and higher standards for all children. In that report, the Governors' Task Force on Education stressed that American education must move beyond special programs targeting individual problems to tackle the larger structural issues that limit student learning. Only by changing many of the basic operating principles of American education in a systemic manner—such as the structure of schools, what is taught and how, attitudes and expectations toward student performance, and the rules and

The National Education Goals for the Year 2000

Goal 1: All children in America will start school ready to learn.

Goal 2: The high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent.

Goal 3: American students will leave grades four, eight, and twelve having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter, including English, mathematics, science, history, and geography, and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our modern economy.

Goal 4: U.S. students will be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement.

Goal 5: Every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

Goal 6: Every school in America will be free of drugs and violence and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning.

procedures that govern the system—can states and localities create communities of learning that work for all students.

Among the strategies for change outlined in *Educating America* is a recommendation for Governors to **challenge educators to eliminate ability grouping and tracking**. Although in the present system ability grouping and tracking are firmly entrenched elements, current grouping practices are critical barriers to creating high expectations for all students. Current ability grouping and tracking practices perpetuate low levels of performance for average and below-average students. In addition, these practices tend to maintain low expectations, especially for minority students. It will be difficult, perhaps impossible, to raise achievement levels for middle- and low-achieving students without addressing current grouping practices.

Changing current grouping practices is one of the most controversial strategies recommended in *Educating America*. In communities that tackle these issues, educators and policymakers meet vociferous opposition. Many parents and community members consider proposals to change current grouping practices a threat to programs such as gifted and talented, Chapter 1, special education, honors classes, resource rooms, and alternative schools. These programs were created to provide spe-

"Challenge Educators to Eliminate Ability Grouping and Tracking"

"Schools must challenge all students to meet high standards. Yet ability grouping in the elementary grades and tracking in the secondary grades prevent this, especially for students placed in the lower groups. There, low expectations become self-fulfilling prophecies and limit students' access to challenging material or instruction. Once placed in lower tracks, few students ever move up.

By high school, the consequences of tracking are particularly devastating for students in the general track, who find themselves unprepared for either work or postsecondary education. For all students, artificial barriers between academic and vocational curriculum and between theoretical and applied learning must be removed.

Eliminating these practices does not require ending special opportunities for students, such as gifted and talented or Advanced Placement courses. Nor does it mean abandoning special education or remedial programs for those who need additional services or assistance.

However, assignment to these or other instructional opportunities should not permanently label individuals, or place enduring limits on their access to learning opportunities.

And educators should be encouraged and assisted to develop new or use available instructional practices—such as peer tutoring, cooperative learning, or reciprocal teaching—that capitalize on the diversity of students' talents, rather than segregating by ability levels."

Excerpted from *Educating America: State Strategies for Achieving the National Education Goals*, Report of the Governors' Task Force on Education (Washington, D.C.: National Governors' Association, 1990), p. 17.

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cial services to children whose needs were not being met in regular classrooms. Changing these programs and returning these children to the regular classroom is perceived as having a detrimental effect.

Underlying the opposition to changing current grouping practices are deeply held beliefs among parents and teachers about how children learn and how their performance may decline in mixed-ability settings. These beliefs are reflected at every level of the education process. Parents are used to ability grouping and tracking practices from their own school experiences. Teachers are accustomed to using ability groups in elementary schools and to teaching children in particular academic levels or "tracks" in secondary schools. Curricula and textbooks are geared toward teaching under these circumstances, and teachers plan their lessons accordingly. Teachers are skeptical and resistant when these practices are changed, especially when they are not given appropriate training and professional development in instructional techniques to use in lieu of ability grouping and tracking.

Parents of "high-ability" children are fearful that their children will be held back. Parents of children with moderate abilities are fearful that their children will be placed in classes where they will be "over their heads." Parents of children who are performing poorly are fearful that their children will not get the attention they need. When faced with changes they fear will threaten their children's success, parents will speak out and exert pressure, causing policymakers to think twice before actively embracing the elimination of these practices.

Why, then, should Governors or other policymakers want to tackle a strategy that is likely to provoke such strong resistance? Current grouping practices tend to sort children out of learning opportunities. The vast majority of students—those placed in the average- and low-ability groups in elementary school or the general track in high school—are not exposed to a rich curriculum and high expectations. Yet to raise student achievement, expectations for all children must rise. All students—whether college-bound or workplace-bound—must be exposed to high-level curricula. It is doubtful that the performance of American students, and especially those students relegated to the general track in high schools or low-level groups in elementary school, can be improved significantly with current ability grouping and tracking practices in place. If students are sorted out of opportunities to succeed or are unnecessarily labeled or categorized, then efforts geared toward systemic educational reform will be hampered. Policymakers

committed to changing the education system must examine current practices and consider alternatives that benefit *all* children. Changing ability grouping and tracking practices must occur within a systemic framework as part of a broader strategy for instructional reform.

This report discusses the need for change in the education system, the impact and reality of current grouping practices, alternatives to current practices, and specific actions Governors can take to promote high achievement for all students. Included in Appendix A are three independent perspectives on current grouping practices. The statements reflect the diversity of opinion on this issue. The debate is complicated because data exist that can be used to support different arguments. As Governors and other policymakers consider changing current grouping and instructional practices, they need to be aware of the multiple viewpoints.

Appendix B contains a summary of a 1992 meeting on ability grouping and tracking that was convened by the National Governors' Association. A list of participants also is presented.

Needed Changes in the Education System

Improving student achievement will require more than changing current grouping practices. If ability grouping and tracking were isolated strategies in a system that otherwise worked well, they would be easy enough to change. However, current ability grouping and tracking practices are integral elements of a larger system that does not work well for many students. The problems in America's schools are structural and go beyond the failings of any individual, program, or school. This is why systemic change is needed. *Change is necessary in order to link social service programs to the education system, to improve students' readiness to enter school, and to define and implement accountability systems that the public understands and embraces.* To replace current ability grouping and tracking practices with educational strategies that are flexible and meet the needs of all children, a number of other barriers to student learning also must be removed including, but not limited to, the following.

Educators need to rethink the school day, and perhaps the school calendar, so that students who need more time to learn can get it. All students now attend school and are exposed to material for the same length of time, regardless of how long it takes them to master the material.

Curricula at all levels must be enriched and perhaps integrated, and students need more experience with

activities that stress analysis, critical thinking, and problemsolving. The curriculum in American schools is inadequate. Even many honors classes present fragmented chunks of information for students to memorize. The majority of students are not exposed to the skills and knowledge required for work or college.

Teachers need to learn and use multiple strategies that appeal to different learning styles and to deploy resources in the classroom more strategically. Most classroom instruction is provided through teacher presentation and individual student assignments. Teachers rely on lecture, repetition of material, and short answer assignments.

Flexible school organization and decentralized decisionmaking would enable schools to make their own decisions on curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The size of schools and the number of students for whom each teacher is responsible (especially in the upper grades) make it difficult to address the individual needs of students. Schools need to look at the most effective use of their resources so that both students and teachers feel responsible for learning. Creating smaller school units within schools, varying class sizes based on the nature of instruction, and assigning students to mentors are all ways to adjust the structure of the school to better meet the needs of students.

Schools need to look at alternative assessment strategies that will reflect student learning more accurately. Commonly used assessment instruments do not require students to demonstrate their ability to use the information and knowledge they have gained, nor do they provide teachers with diagnostic information about student performance.

Schools must explore alternative ways to integrate instruction of Chapter 1, learning disabled, handicapped, and gifted and talented students into the regular classroom. Students with special needs are either grouped together or pulled out of classrooms for special instruction that is not coordinated with the regular instruction.

States and districts must enhance the capacity of schools and school practitioners to direct and implement change and address any financial inequities that may exist. Some districts have staff capable of developing and implementing innovative change, while others do not. At the same time, many districts are stifled by bureaucratic and political red tape. In addition, the financial and administrative resources available to individual schools and communities differ widely. Some communities do not have enough textbooks to go around, while others have computer labs and aides in every classroom.

Students need incentives to work hard and must understand what the stakes are if they do not. Student attitudes and habits must be addressed. American students have become used to an education system that does not expect as much from them as it should. Students need to know why they are expected to learn more, why the rules are changing, and what benefits they will receive as a result of their efforts.

These barriers and others to student learning will not be affected solely by changing current grouping practices. A genuine attempt to raise the educational performance of students requires an overhaul of the entire system. Governors are in a position to lead and support the dramatic and difficult changes called for in American education. Governors can set the conditions for change in their state by:

- building consensus in the state around high performance standards for all students and developing strategies to reach those standards;
- placing systemic education reform—where the many pieces and levels of the education system and its support structures are coherently linked—high on the agenda for action, and generating a series of reforms to restructure the whole education system;
- educating the public about the required changes and explaining how reforms will result in a stronger education system for all students, even though a favored program may be cut;
- creating incentives for educators to build solid educational alternatives to current grouping and instructional practices that are flexible in nature, so that parents can see the opportunities their children will have when these practices are changed;
- supporting the development of strong assistance networks and professional development opportunities for educators who are willing to develop instructional alternatives to help all students achieve high standards; and
- sustaining support for reform beyond the initial stages so that there is sufficient time for the changes to take hold and the desired outcomes to be accomplished.

Current Grouping Practices: The Issues

Throughout their school careers, students are sorted into instructional groups based on their achievement level or academic potential. At the elementary level, students are sorted into homogeneous "ability groups" for instruction. At the secondary level, students are "tracked" into different courses based on achievement. Usually, those in each group or track are taught different material using different instructional strategies.

In elementary schools, there are three standard ways of practicing ability grouping. Students can be grouped into homogeneous classes, clustered within a class for small group instruction, or pulled out of the classroom for special instruction. Students may be grouped for all or part of the school day. In some elementary classes, all ability groups are exposed to the same curriculum, but the pace and level of complexity of assignments and tasks vary. In others, the groups are exposed to different skills and concepts. The most common and visible grouping practices occur in mathematics and reading instruction.

At the secondary level, curriculum tracks are designed to accommodate different levels of student achievement. Typically, these tracks are divided into vocational, general, and college-preparatory classes. High-achieving students take college-preparatory classes, while low- and middle-achieving students take general or vocational classes. In many schools, these three tracks have expanded to include special sections for programs such as honors, Advanced Placement, remedial, limited-English-proficient, and special education. In most high schools, students take courses within their track assignment for all or most of the day, and most students stay in the same track throughout their high school career with few opportunities for reassessment or shifting to other tracks.

Underlying current ability grouping and tracking practices are several assumptions about ability. One assumption is that student achievement is a result of innate talent. Another is that ability is constant and can be measured accurately. Yet educators and researchers have found the following contradictions to

these assumptions: student achievement at any point in time may or may not be a result of innate ability; an individual's ability varies across content and skill areas; it is difficult to measure ability in ways that are independent of actual learning and that are constant over time; and students do not necessarily learn better in groups in which individuals have similar abilities.

Because the assumptions underlying current grouping practices are faulty, the results have been disabling. Instead of enhancing student learning, current grouping practices tend to accelerate the gaps in student learning and create barriers that limit a student's ability to ever catch up. For many children, assignment to different ability groups or tracks in school is paramount to a decision about lifelong opportunities. This is especially true in situations where grouping is inflexible and for those students who are placed in the general or low-level track. However, just changing ability grouping and tracking practices does not necessarily solve this problem. School organization and instructional practices need to be changed to address more effectively the wide range of student skills and interests in any classroom setting, and to promote higher achievement for all students.

Why Do Current Grouping Practices Produce Negative Effects for Some Students?

At a glance, the pattern of student achievement in this country, with vast differences between high and low achievers, may seem to confirm the logic of current grouping practices. However, a closer look at how ability grouping and tracking systems work reveals a more complex set of factors. Resource inequities, placement practices, and inadequate educational opportunities across tracks confound whatever natural differences in ability exist and raise serious questions for policymakers to consider. Students in different ability groups are treated differently—those in the higher tracks get more, while those in the lower tracks get less from the experience.

Watered-Down Curricula. Reviews of curricula and practice indicate that students in lower ability groups or low-level tracks learn less than those in higher tracks—not because they are less able, but because they are taught less and less is expected of them. Reviews of curricula in the lower tracks reveal a watered-down course of study that focuses on basic skills. Skills are often taught in bite-size pieces that lack context. Exposure to rich content material and analytical, conceptual, or problemsolving skills is reserved for students in the high-ability groups. Students in low-ability groups get more

worksheets and repetitious drills, while students in higher ability groups write essays and have extensive class discussions. Students in the lower tracks, including the general track, are often asked to read less, do less homework, and write less.

Fewer Resources. Students in the lower tracks receive less of everything else. A number of studies have found wide disparities in the resources designated for different groups and levels. Lower ability classes generally have the most students, the oldest textbooks, and the worst teachers. In some districts, whole schools are "tracked" at low levels and do not offer advanced or college-preparatory classes.

Faulty Sorting. School sorting practices do not hold up under scrutiny. None of the commonly used measures of student ability produces a reliable measure for sorting. Nor are schools consistent in their application of the criteria. Students with similar test scores and intelligence quotients (IQs) can be found in different ability groups or tracks. Special programs designed to improve college-attendance rates for poor and minority students in the middle and lower tracks demonstrate that these students are capable of performing advanced-level work.

Resegregation. The sorting process is inequitable. African-American, Hispanic, and poor white students are substantially overrepresented in the lower tracks and lower ability groups. Yet in a number of schools, reviews of students' scores on standardized tests indicate that African-American and Hispanic students assigned to the lower tracks often have test scores equal to or higher than those of other students assigned to higher tracks. A substantial body of anecdotal evidence suggests that minority students and poor students are routinely discouraged from taking more difficult classes and are not even asked whether they would like to go to college.

Cumulative Effects. The cumulative effects of current tracking practices are severe. For example, students in the lower ability groups in elementary school are not prepared for or assigned to pre-algebra or laboratory science in junior high school, do not take Algebra 1, and are therefore unable to take higher level math and science courses in high school. The gap in student achievement widens throughout the school years to create disparities that are almost impossible to overcome. Often, students who begin school three or perhaps six months "behind" their fellow students are a year behind by second grade and two years behind by sixth grade.

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy. Current grouping practices create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Instead of high expectations, challenging curricula, and exposure to complex thinking, students in the lower

and average tracks are exposed to a limited curriculum at a slower pace. Students are expected to learn less and, as predicted, they do. As students move through the system and into high school, the gaps in student learning increase so that average and lower track students are locked into inadequate curricula and cannot move up. Placement in a low-ability group or track all but guarantees a low level of performance for those students who are placed there.

The Realities Behind Current Practice

Despite these effects, current grouping practices are firmly entrenched in the current system. If Governors, policymakers, and educators want to change these grouping practices successfully, even within a systemic reform agenda, they must understand why people want to keep things the way they are. Current practices in ability grouping and tracking are a response over time to changing conditions and demands from different groups. Changing such established practices requires confronting the reasons the system developed the way it did and the supports that hold it in place.

Resistance to Change. Even when the negative consequences of current practices are acknowledged, people are resistant to change. Perhaps the most difficult issue is envisioning what the new system will look like. Parents understand the schooling process they went through—whether or not they liked it and whether or not it was useful—and are suspicious of change. People need to know what will replace these practices and how their children's lives will be improved. Educators, parents, and students need to experience alternative forms of instruction (e.g., flexible grouping practices, cooperative learning, new uses of technology, team teaching, and different classroom and school designs) that ensure high-quality education, before they will let go of the current system.

Support for the Current System. Some groups benefit from the current system and do not want to risk losing those benefits. No Governor or educator can successfully challenge current grouping practices without addressing this opposition and the larger context in which current ability grouping and tracking practices operate. Until parents, teachers, and students believe that the new system will ensure success, they will oppose changing current practices.

Raising the Stakes. The proliferation of tracking levels in high schools was, in part, a response to increased competition for college admission and future employment. Parents and college-bound students now see honors and advanced placement labels as necessities for college admission. At the same time,

there is resistance to making these courses much more demanding to meet internationally competitive standards, for fear that students will receive lower grades and lose their competitive advantage for college admission. Change will be difficult to achieve until educators in both the elementary and secondary education and higher education systems work together to redesign school systems and universities to serve all students and provide access for all to high-level classes and programs. In addition, employers must change their hiring practices so that students know they must take and master high-level courses in order to obtain a job during school or upon graduation.

Widening the Gap. Schools have responded to the apparent increase in the number of students who are not prepared for regular classes by creating remedial and basic classes. Many educators believe that these children cannot learn regular-level—and certainly not advanced-level—work. Parents of other students believe that the presence of low-performing students will keep their children from advancing.

The Vast Middle. Those students assigned to the general track take such courses as consumer math, physical science, and basic English. These courses assume that students have low potential and that they will not work hard. Few resources are spent enriching these classes or updating the curriculum. This results in students who are turned off and disengaged from the educational process, with minimal opportunities for applied learning, and school programs that are totally unlike the world of work.

Belief and Practice. Teachers and other educators also believe, as they have been taught, that current grouping practices help students learn better and protect slow students from competing with brighter students. Current grouping practices are seen as ways of managing instruction, given the wide range of skills that students demonstrate, so that instruction can be matched with student needs. Ability grouping and tracking as currently implemented also create perks for teachers. The richer curriculum and higher involvement of students in high-ability classes such as gifted and honors can make teaching a challenging pleasure that they are loathe to give up. For example, the prospects of teaching algebra to students who have not mastered basic computational skills, or teaching literature to students with widely different reading skills, are daunting.

Special Programs. Existing program rules and regulations tend to maintain current ability grouping and tracking practices. Requirements for special programs such as gifted and talented, compensatory education, and special education require students to be targeted for services in ways that have con-

tributed to the labeling, segregation, and grouping of students according to perceived abilities. This is because many times students are pulled out of their regular classrooms to participate in these programs. Yet schools that currently change the way services are delivered risk losing funding for these special programs. In addition, in many heterogeneous districts, specialized programs geared to higher track students, including gifted and talented and magnet programs, are used as a vehicle to prevent middle- and upper-class flight from the district. Changes in these programs provoke strong resistance from their advocates who fear that eligible students will not receive these hard-won services.

Gifted and Talented. Proponents of gifted and talented programs, including parents and educators, believe that very bright students are held back by those who may not perform as well. They believe that these students learn best among their peers, that they need an accelerated curriculum, and that special teaching strategies and resources should be used to enhance their creativity and inquisitiveness. Despite evidence that very bright students are not harmed when placed in classes with students of mixed ability, beliefs persist about the need to separate these students.

Inflexible Structure. The structure of schools reinforces the need for grouping and its negative consequences. Time is typically fixed in schools, even though individual student learning varies. Fixed time blocks for instruction limits the response to students needing more time to master material. Yet if students do not cover the material, they are not prepared for the next course in the sequence. Sequencing curriculum so that courses with substantial content knowledge are off limits to "low-ability" students further impedes their educational progress.

Not All Grouping is Bad. Grouping practices that are flexible, short term, continuously evaluated, and do not label or categorize students can enhance instruction. Students have different skill levels and interests and sometimes this should influence instruction and learning opportunities, whether it is in the instruction of reading in the early elementary grades or the provision of advanced work for highly proficient students in high school. Each grouping practice should be individually evaluated for its appropriateness and possible negative consequences. Grouping should not be set in stone so that students have no options once they are assigned to a certain group or track.

Changing Current Grouping and Instructional Practices to Promote High Student Achievement

It must be recognized that the current system does not guarantee high achievement opportunities for all students. This applies not only to low-achieving students but also to high-achieving students. Current ability grouping and tracking practices are being challenged because they limit the performance of most students. Educators and researchers have suggested other ways to promote high achievement from all students.

Expect All Students to Achieve at High Performance Levels. All students need to be exposed to a rich and demanding curriculum. Students cannot learn the material required to be internationally competitive if they are not exposed to it. Providing all students with an enriched curriculum by keeping students of mixed ability together or using flexible grouping practices can give average and lower achieving students the opportunity to learn the more demanding material now taught only to high achievers.

Give Open-Ended Assignments. To challenge the assumption that "bright" students might be held back by "slow" students in a mixed-ability class, assignments and projects can be designed for a range of performance levels. Writing assignments have this quality. Asked to write sentences, paragraphs, or essays, students who possess large vocabularies and the ability to create complex sentence structures and who can think abstractly can apply these advanced skills. Students who have a smaller vocabulary and less facility with complex sentence structure can work at their own level, while being encouraged and taught to achieve at higher levels. Projects, oral presentations, problem-oriented tasks, and research enable students to be exposed to the same material but perform at different levels.

Use Different Instructional Strategies. Teaching students of mixed abilities so that all will progress also requires some new instructional strategies. Many of the instructional techniques that work for a wide range of students—such as cooperative learning, individualized instruction, project-oriented assignments, integrated curricula, and hands-on learning—are known. Experience with these teaching techniques indicates that students not only can be challenged in a mixed group environment, but also may learn better—more quickly and with a greater depth of understanding—in a mixed instructional setting. For example, in cooperative learning, small groups of students of mixed ability work together to solve problems and complete tasks. In this setting, lower achieving students can model the study skills and work habits of more

The Process of Change: How a School Shifted its Grouping Practices

Rundlett Junior High School in Concord, New Hampshire, spent six years moving from homogeneous grouping to heterogeneous grouping in the seventh and eighth grades in all subject areas except mathematics, where some grouping still occurs. The process of change Rundlett undertook from 1985 through 1992 is highlighted below.

1985-1986—Low-level classes were replaced with a small group study skills session for all students. This class provided time for reteaching, reinforcement of concepts and ideas, remediation for students needing assistance, and enrichment activities for other students.

1986-1987—Rundlett started block scheduling for seventh graders. This scheduling format provides common planning time for teachers and the ability to have flexible grouping and regrouping. Faculty planned for new grouping practices in science and social studies.

1987-1988—Heterogeneous classes for science and social studies designed; eighth grade heterogeneous language workshop introduced for consideration.

1988-1989—Block scheduling, grouping and regrouping of students in seventh grade continued; decisions made on heterogeneous classes in social studies, science, and language arts. Concerns from parents on the goals of heterogeneous grouping clarified. Professional development and training for new instructional methods increased.

1989-1990—Special education services reorganized; in-class professional and paraprofessional support for special needs children increased. Eighth grade teachers decided to increase the number of heterogeneous classes during the next year.

1990-1991—Heterogeneous groupings in eighth grade implemented in English, language workshop, social studies, and science. Three levels remained for eighth grade math courses. Lower performing students receive assistance in class and out of class from teachers, specialists, and aides. Higher performing students challenged by additional work, independent projects, in-depth reading assignments, and expanded research. Conversations commenced with ninth grade teachers about heterogeneous grouping.

1991-1992—Mathematics offerings in only two levels rather than three, with all students taking pre-algebra. Continued development of new instructional methods such as cooperative learning, colloquia, independent projects, laboratory approaches, writing process, and peer tutoring. Continued in-class support at all grade levels.

SOURCE: This summary is based on information presented in *Crossing the Tracks, How "Untracking" Can Save America's Schools* by Anne Wheelock (New York: The New Press, 1992), pp. 40-41.

proficient students. In the process of explaining the material, higher achieving students often develop greater mastery themselves by developing a deeper understanding of the task or skill.

Support Professional Development and Teacher Interaction. Becoming proficient at these new teaching strategies is not easy. Teachers need to be trained in new methods, but they also

need the opportunity to learn from one another, to take risks, and to evaluate and rethink what works and what does not work. Less adventuresome and skeptical teachers need access to classrooms where teachers are successfully using alternative strategies. New teachers need to be able to ask experienced teachers for assistance. Teacher training must change to reflect the needs and expectations of the classrooms of the future.

Revise the Curriculum. The curriculum itself can create barriers to student achievement. In some cases, the scope of the curriculum is so limited that students cannot possibly meet high standards. In other cases, the sequencing of materials places unnecessary barriers to achievement. Many states already have begun to review and revise curriculum frameworks to include earlier mastery of concepts with an emphasis on analytic and conceptual skills and problemsolving. These efforts need to continue and be expanded to challenge the current sequencing of materials that locks students out of learning opportunities.

Support Student Learning. If students have difficulty mastering curriculum content, other support opportunities and alternative learning environments should be available. Instead of keeping the time fixed and altering the material to be mastered, schools could alter the timeframe for learning. Students who need extra time or support could attend a second class session or study group on that subject. Many schools offer homework hotlines, computer-aided instruction, tutoring after school or in study hall, or special Saturday schools to help students. Older students can assist and mentor younger students.

A Role for States

If it were possible to transform the whole education system at once, and to incorporate all of the needed changes on the first day of school in September, much of the resistance to changing current ability grouping and tracking practices would quickly dissipate. Students, parents, and teachers might be skeptical at first, but the enriched opportunities and support available for all students in the new system would quickly win over their doubts.

Unfortunately, change takes time. New curricula cannot be developed over the summer. Teachers cannot develop and evaluate new instructional strategies in a few months. Students previously underprepared do not develop the confidence, motivation, and study habits necessary for success just because they have new opportunities. And parents' concerns about changing a system that they perceive is working for their children—especially since it seemingly worked for them—will not disappear overnight. Best estimates are that it takes three to five years *at a minimum* to tackle the comprehensive issues necessary to create new school environments.

The support of Governors and other policymakers is vital to the success of these long-term reform efforts in schools. The required changes cannot be accomplished by a piecemeal approach or in isolated schools. Resistance from within the system and throughout the community can overpower the best intentions of educators and policymakers. Educators need political support and encouragement to make the difficult changes required; they need guidance to keep their eyes on the goal; they need permission to take risks; and they need help. And state policymakers need the support of educators to help respond to public resistance and concerns about changing current practices.

Five states have taken the lead in developing policy advisories and recommendations that move current practices away from traditional ability grouping and tracking practices. All of them provide technical assistance and staff development opportunities for schools

attempting to change their classroom grouping practices.

California initiated a comprehensive reform of its middle grade programs after its Department of Education published *Caught in the Middle* in 1987. Part of these reforms called for reducing tracking practices with an advisory not to track middle grade students according to gender, ethnicity, general ability, primary language, or handicap. The Massachusetts State Board of Education issued a 1990 advisory paper recommending that schools consider the elimination of ability grouping and tracking. The New York State Department of Education provides guidelines for moving away from tracking and ability grouping in its *Regents' Policy Statement on Middle-Level Education and Schools with Middle-Level Grades*.

Kentucky recently implemented an ungraded primary program for students in kindergarten through grade three. Grouping practices in these settings are flexible so that students can progress at their own rate. In addition, Oregon passed a law in 1991 that shifts its secondary programs so that all students take the same high-level course of study through the tenth grade to earn a certificate of initial mastery. After earning the certificate, which will be benchmarked to international standards, students will then choose between a professional and technical curriculum or a college-preparatory curriculum so that all students will have the requisite skills to enter the world of work or go to college.

State policies can encourage schools to develop alternatives to current ability grouping and tracking practices as part of a larger strategy for systemic education reform. A number of supportive state strategies are possible.

- **Incentives to schools to consider more flexible grouping practices.** New state policies, deregulation of existing policies, and the targeting of funds that support "detracked" schools or flexible grouping are incentives that can encourage schools to shift away from current ability grouping and tracking practices. By making the harmful effects of current ability grouping and tracking practices known, disseminating alternative strategies, giving small development grants, and publicizing current efforts, states can encourage the spread of reforms. States also can model instructional practices through state programs that encourage schools to use more flexible grouping practices.
- **Networks of practitioners in schools that have changed their grouping practices.** People in schools learn best from one another. Much resistance to change can be dissipated by establishing networks of teachers in the academic dis-

ciplines and educational organizations who have experience changing their grouping practices or working in detracked schools. These teachers can share their expertise with colleagues who are considering changing the ability grouping and tracking practices in their schools.

- **Assistance to schools.** Schools need help to move away from current ability grouping and tracking practices. Few districts have the internal capacity to design and implement the broad-scale changes that are needed to improve American education. Providing technical assistance in diagnosing problems, formulating plans, and implementing change will encourage schools to take risks. Schools of education, especially those in state-supported public colleges and universities, can take the lead in assisting educators in elementary and secondary schools in moving away from current ability grouping and tracking practices through their pre-service training programs. State departments of education also can provide ongoing technical assistance and professional development opportunities for schools and systems attempting to change their grouping practices.
- **Professional development for staff.** Teachers and administrators must be trained in new grouping practices. Administrators will need training in school planning, change strategies, and evaluating reform. Teachers will need training in new instructional strategies, curriculum content, and student assessment. Because new habits are not learned in a single workshop, training needs to be thorough and ongoing. Pre-service and in-service training opportunities can be provided through state-supported universities, the state department of education, and local school systems. Networks of practitioners with experience in changing their grouping practices or working in detracked environments, as mentioned previously, also can provide needed expertise.
- **Communicate the need to change.** Policymakers and educators need to open direct lines of communication to help the public understand the broader reform agenda. Policymakers need to listen to parental concerns and engage parents and community members in frank discussions about why changes are needed.
- **Focus on the context of reform.** Systemic state reform efforts that set standards for education, develop authentic assessment strategies, encourage curricular and instructional reform, and promote schoolwide strategies to increase student achievement lay the groundwork for specific

policies, such as changing current ability grouping and tracking practices.

Changing current ability grouping and tracking practices alone will not improve the quality of American education or the performance of American students. Few positive outcomes will occur if students are summarily assigned to mixed classes with no other changes in schooling. Successfully changing current instructional practices depends upon a larger systemic effort to create an educational environment that promotes high standards for all students, provides all students with a rich and challenging curriculum, and focuses instruction and support services around students' learning needs.

Appendix A

Perspectives on Current Ability Grouping and Tracking Practices

There are a variety of perspectives on current grouping practices. The debate is complicated because data exist that can be used to support different arguments. The three statements that follow reflect some of the different views on this issue.

Detracking: Higher Quality Schools for All Children

by Jeannie Oakes

Since the 1920s, most educators, policymakers, and the public have judged ability grouping and tracking to be functional and democratic. With standardized tests that could sort students "scientifically" into different groups, tracked schools have appeared, on their surface, to be a sound way to provide students with the education that best suits their abilities, and to provide the nation with the diverse array of workers it needs. We've been wrong. In the past two decades, findings from high-quality research have provided evidence that emphatically contradicts this conventional view, leading many policymakers and educators to call for "detracking." Additionally, emerging evidence suggests that when detracking is approached in the context of systemic school reform, it promises to improve the quality of schooling for all students.

There is no question that tracking, the assessment practices that support it, and the differences in educational opportunity that result have limited students' schooling opportunities, achievements, and life chances. Students not in the highest tracks have fewer intellectual challenges, less engaging and supportive classrooms, and fewer well-trained teachers. Many educators justify these differences by pointing to differences in how students perform on commonly accepted tests of ability and past achievement. However, research about human capacity and learning suggests that conventional tests measure only a very narrow range of students' abilities; in particular, they provide little information about students' higher order cognitive abilities, such as how well they generate ideas or solve problems or how well they can accomplish real-world tasks. Furthermore, students don't profit from tracking in terms of learning. High-ability students learn just as well in mixed-ability groups, and the rest learn more when they are offered the opportunities typically reserved for the high track.

Tracking hasn't solved the problem of workforce preparation, evidenced by employers' increasing disenchantment with students' knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Rapidly changing work technologies and out-of-date equipment limit middle schools' and high schools' capacities to prepare students with specific occupational skills. Moreover, as more jobs require greater sophistication in literacy, numeracy, and problemsolving, schools are under fire for failing to provide entry-level workers with the academic and thinking competencies that many jobs require. The old confidence that a tracked curriculum will ensure that noncollege-bound students will leave high school ready for work has been shattered. At the same time, the tracks assigned to prepare students for

college also are being judged as failing to make the nation's "best" students academically competitive with their peers in other countries.

Pressure to eliminate tracking, however, is not based solely on disillusionment about its effectiveness. Increasingly, policymakers and educators are questioning the fairness and morality of a school structure that places the burden of schooling inequalities most heavily on immigrant, low-income, and minority children. Tests undoubtedly underestimate minority students' capabilities. Stereotypical low expectations for minority students negatively influence their placement (e.g., "Latino parents don't care much about their children's school achievement and are unlikely to help their children at home."). The "politicking" of savvy parents who want their children placed in the best classes further skews placements. Although such parents are not exclusively white, in most schools middle-class white parents better understand the inequalities in the school structure and feel more confident that the school will respond positively to their pressure. Students from different backgrounds sometimes receive different information, advice, and attention from counselors and teachers. Although many secondary schools claim that students "choose" their tracks, low-track, minority students most often report that others make decisions for them.

All this is clear. What's not so clear is that detracking promises to *raise the quality of schooling for all, even for those now advantaged by the tracking system.* Tracking enables much else that is wrong with schools to continue: thin, skills-based curricula, passive, teacher-dominated instructional strategies, and standardized, paper-and-pencil assessment, to name just a few. In contrast, detracking requires change in all these practices and will press schools toward richer and more rigorous curriculum, more active, hands-on teaching, more authentic forms of assessment, and more effective configurations of time, staff, and other resources.

Efforts to detrack schools also must confront counterproductive educational values and beliefs. Conventional, if increasingly obsolete, conceptions of intelligence, as well as deep-seated racist and classist attitudes and prejudices, support tracking. Tracking conforms to deeply ingrained, if no longer useful, bureaucratic notions of hierarchy and assembly-line-like specialization. Competition and individualism, to the exclusion of cooperation and the common good, also bolster and legitimize tracking by erroneously suggesting that "good" education is a scarce commodity available only to a few winners. These values and beliefs must give way if schools are to serve all children well.

Reformers also must address political pressures that prevent schools from serving all children well. In a competitive system that offers only a small percentage of students slots in the high-track classes, middle-class white parents, in particular, have few options but

to push to have their children better educated than other children. In racially mixed schools, the pressure from such parents to keep tracked schools can take on another dimension. Fearing that minority student enrollment leads to lower educational standards, white and wealthy parents often lobby for their children's enrollment in more racially and socioeconomically homogeneous gifted and talented programs or honors courses within desegregated schools. Most truly believe that their children will receive a better education in a homogeneous classroom. Unfortunately, such parental concerns are fueled by advocates for high-achieving students, particularly students who qualify for gifted and talented programs. These advocates misjudge the research on tracking and current reform efforts as threats to high-quality schooling for their constituents. They mistakenly fear that detracking will necessarily undermine the opportunities now available to high achievers.

In fact, detracking is an essential part of systemic reforms that blend new school structures and teaching practices with new confidence in children's abilities. This powerful combination can enable schools to provide *for all* a far richer and meaningful education than that is now reserved for only those in the top tracks. But such reforms require a strong, collective advocacy for all children—not just minorities, the disadvantaged, or the gifted. Building such advocacy is a political process that requires the leadership of policymakers, as well as educators.

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Grouping for Instruction

by Ann Robinson

Few educational issues promote more discord than discussions about grouping students. Sweeping generalizations are often made about the effects of grouping on the learning and life chances of our children with little acknowledgement that a variety of practices are being lumped together by the claimants. There are important questions for policymakers to consider.

- What are some ways to group students effectively?
- What are key policy issues related to grouping?

Grouping—A Collection of Practices

Grouping practices are not all the same. Tracking, by which we mean early placement into separate college-preparatory or vocational curricula with little opportunity to change, is widely regarded as undesirable. Likewise, grouping students by global ability measures in all-day elementary classes with no attempt to adapt the curriculum has few effects, either positive or negative. In contrast, many grouping arrangements are flexible and varied and do increase student achievement. What are some examples?

- **Time.** One way to group effectively is to allow time rather than age or grade level to determine grouping practices. Students who need more time to master challenging content and sophisticated skills should be given the time to do so. For example, students who find mathematics difficult to master might spend two hours a day in algebra rather than one, or they might spend one hour a day in formal mathematics instruction and a second hour in small study groups with adult coaches. Students who already have mastered most of the material under the current system of expectations should be permitted to move ahead—not be required to wait. Learners who need less time to acquire challenging content and skills should be allowed to advance in the curriculum at their own pace—a pace considerably faster than what is now usually permitted. Students who can master Algebra I and Algebra II in one year or less should be provided with the opportunity to do so. Students differ in the rates at which they learn effectively. If we allow some students to have *more* time to acquire valued skills, we also must be more receptive to students who require *less* time.

- **Readiness.** Readiness is another way to group students effectively. The nongraded primary is an example of grouping by readiness rather than by age. Although children may enter school at similar ages, their individual needs, accomplishments, and interests differ. Not to adapt to them is restrictive to both child and teacher. For example, youngsters who need more preparation and practice in learning to read should be given intensive assistance with interesting material. Conversely, students who are precocious readers should be given opportunities to learn content and skills new to them, usually with students who are older and with texts complex enough to challenge them. Although some adaption occurs when students are given general, open-ended assignments or tasks, grouping by readiness also implies that students are provided with direct instruction from the teacher at a level higher than the one at which they currently are operating. Readiness also involves student interests, preferences, and motivation. Allowing students to group themselves based on common interests and a readiness to study the material at hand is an example of effective grouping practice.

Criticisms of grouping usually treat it as a unitary practice, but there are at least ten forms of grouping, many of which have quite positive effects on important measures such as student achievement, self-esteem, self-concept, and a liking for school. For example, grouping in elementary reading and mathematics increases achievement for all students. Grouping high-achievement students together for subject acceleration produces large achievement gains. Grouping for instruction permits teachers to gear lessons to the readiness of students, increases achievement when the instruction is presented at a level and pace that match students' needs, and holds student attention for learning.

A Caution for Policymakers

General policy statements that call vaguely for heterogeneous grouping by age or by achievement can lead unintentionally to the removal of well-established, high-level opportunities from schools. Such actions are in conflict with raising standards and expectations for our students. Of these unintended negative outcomes, none is more serious than the removal of Advanced Placement (AP) courses from high schools in the name of detracking. The flawed logic is that since not all students are ready to learn AP Calculus or Chemistry or Art History, no students will be allowed to do so. A more reasonable response is to *increase*, not decrease, advanced opportunities and to prepare more students to take advantage of them. In *Educating America: State Strategies for Achieving the National Goals*, the National Governors' Association specifically acknowl-

edged that an endorsement of school reform initiatives does not imply that schools should abandon existing high-level opportunities or services to academically talented students.

In the emerging vision for our schools, we have moved from an excessive emphasis on basic skills in the classroom to a belief that we should provide students with a rich and exciting curriculum. Higher standards, authentic learning opportunities, and complex assessments reflect our new beliefs about what children should know and be able to do. Within the current climate of higher expectations and achievement, however, differences in student interests and accomplishments do exist and must be accommodated. Classrooms of the future need to be challenging and intriguing to all our students, including those who learn rapidly.

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The Debate on Grouping

by Albert Shanker

One of the most controversial issues in U.S. education is homogeneous grouping—that is, separating youngsters into classes according to how well they achieve—versus heterogeneous grouping—putting children achieving at all levels into the same class. There are people who say that homogeneous grouping, or tracking as it is sometimes called, is essential to providing every child with a good education. Others are convinced that tracking labels kids in lower tracks forever and makes them perform worse than they would in mixed classes. They condemn tracking as elitist and discriminatory. Generally, educators who write and speak about tracking denounce it. However, it is widely practiced, so many people must think it is beneficial for children—or perhaps don't know what else to do.

Instead of joining this argument, we need to realize that both sides are right and both are wrong. The question is not, "Should we track or reject tracking entirely?" It is, "How do we organize schools and classrooms, given the fact that kids learn differently and at different rates?"

People who say that heterogeneous grouping doesn't work point to the differences among children. They ask, "If you don't track, how can you keep the curriculum from being watered down? How can you teach an eighth-grade class when some of the kids are functioning at a third-grade level and others are at a sixth- or ninth- or eleventh-grade level? How do you maintain high standards without causing youngsters who are struggling to give up?"

These are real problems given our basic instructional method—whole-class instruction, which means presenting the lesson to the entire class—especially since teachers must cover a lot of ground. If the teacher pitches the lesson to "average" students, the kids who know the material or catch on quickly will get bored and tune out; the ones who are behind and can't follow will do the same. Whatever the teacher does, many students will get little out of the lesson.

But there are alternatives. One is presented by Harold Stevenson and James Stigler in *The Learning Gap* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Summit Books, 1992). They describe how teachers in Asian elementary schools make effective use of whole-class teaching with mixed classes. Their secret is depth instead of breadth. Math teachers focus on a single problem instead of many different ones. They get each student to explain the way he or she solved the problem and compare it with other students' methods. This allows youngsters to hear the reasoning behind successful and unsuccessful strategies for

solving a problem. And it means that virtually everybody understands the solution—and various ways of getting to it—well enough to build on it.

A second alternative to tracking is to organize the class like a one-room school or a Boy Scout troop. Instead of listening to the teacher all the time, children work at their level, individually or in small groups, and with the help of the teacher or paraprofessionals or other youngsters.

These ways of organizing a heterogeneous class do not bore some kids and leave others behind. All students are engaged and working hard.

Just as heterogeneous grouping can work if it's done right, so can tracking. In other industrialized countries where they systematically track, all their students—top, bottom, and middle—do better than ours. A decent system of tracking offers a tough, challenging curriculum in every track. In Germany, where kids start being tracked when they are in fifth grade, all get an education of value. Whether they are in a track that will lead to a university, a technical school, or an apprenticeship, German students know that the work they do will get them something they want. So they work hard.

In this country, when we track we almost always do it miserably. Poor parents and minorities, especially, perceive the lower tracks as dumping grounds for their children, and it's not hard to see why. Kids in these tracks often get little worthwhile work to do; they spend a lot of time filling in the blanks in workbooks or ditto sheets. And because we expect almost nothing of them, they learn very little.

When people argue about homogeneous and heterogeneous grouping they usually compare a bad example of homogeneous grouping with a good one of heterogeneous grouping—or vice versa. When we compare the best of both, we find that both have strengths. Until one system is shown to be vastly superior to the other, we should not mandate either homogeneous or heterogeneous grouping but work to develop effective models of both, taking particular care with tracking systems that they are not used to separate students racially. Then we should give teachers and families a high degree of choice about the system they prefer.

Albert Shanker is president of the American Federation of Teachers.

Appendix B

Working Meeting/Issue Analysis: Governors' Task Force on Education Recommendation to "Challenge Educators to Eliminate Ability Grouping and Tracking"

Participants in a 1992 NGA-sponsored working meeting explored strategies to consider if ability grouping and tracking practices were eliminated. This working meeting of educators and policy analysts focused on how policymakers and states can implement these strategies within a broader framework of systemic education reform. The purpose of the meeting was not to reach consensus but to discuss the issue and exchange different points of view. Specifically, participants examined why it is that ability grouping and tracking exists, what it is that all students should achieve, what the most effective instructional tools are to help all students achieve at high levels, and what directions states and school districts should take with regard to ability grouping and tracking as they move toward systemic school reform. This publication builds on the deliberations that took place during the meeting.

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